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Can We Share Ethical Views with Other Religions?

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**CAN WE SHARE ETHICAL
VIEWS WITH OTHER
RELIGIONS?**

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**CAN WE SHARE ETHICAL VIEWS
WITH OTHER RELIGIONS?**

**Robert Hannaford
Ripon College**

**Presented to the WMU Center
for the Study of Ethics in Society**

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CAN WE SHARE ETHICAL VIEWS WITH OTHER RELIGIONS?

Leaders of world religions, such as the Dalai Lama, have claimed that the world's major religions have a central body of ethical agreement.¹

However, some recent writers in Christian theology have argued that no principles could be shared across religious and cultural lines. They argue that the ethics or the ethical contents of one religion or culture are not detachable or transferable from one culture or religion to another. From their arguments, it would follow that one **could not** share the ethical views of a member of another religion or culture.

These theologians' arguments seem to me to be of great importance, for if we believed we shared no standard of ethical judgment with members of other religions and cultures, would we not be led to deny any basis for agreeing with them on any moral judgment?

If these arguments were sound, would not all ethical judgments become relative to the authority of one's own particular cultural or religious tradition?

Concerns and questions such as these lead me to examine some of those arguments of the theologians. In doing so, I propose to show that there are ethical norms that are applicable across cultural and religious boundaries.

In looking at their insights, one encounters the key question of whether it is possible to **share an ethic** or share an ethical or moral view with members of another tradition. (In discussing these views, I will use the terms "ethical" and "moral" interchangeably, to refer to a generally accepted view by which we judge actions to be right or wrong. I take it that it is fundamental to the meaning of being moral or ethical that one should act out of respect for one's fellow human beings and that actions will be judged right or wrong on that basis.)

We should note the ambiguity of this "share-an-ethic" expression and the possible confusion arising from its use. In speaking of sharing an ethic, we may be speaking of sharing ethical principles, such as the concept of law or the Golden Rule, or we may be speaking of sharing an ethical code or an entire way of life. The latter, the notion of sharing an ethical code or way of life, would include all the specific customs and practices that can enter into the

moral judgments of a society. An ethic-as-a-way-of-life would include such practices as polygamy, the subordination of females to male siblings, and specific property rights. Such customs are elements of a culture's or a religion's ethic: expectations are built around them and actions are often justified or condemned insofar as they are seen to be in accord with such customs and practices.

That ethical principles or standards are distinct from such customs and from ethics-as-a-way-of-life will be plain from the fact that we apply principles such as the Golden Rule or the standard of fairness and justice to criticize or modify customs. We do so, for example, when we criticize the unfairness of the practice of apartheid in another culture or criticize the unfairness of practices which are seen to be suppressing women's rights in our own culture.

In arguing that we can and do share ethical views with members of other cultures and religions, I will be arguing that we share ethical principles or standards, not that we share the total context of ethical attitudes and customs of other cultures and religions.

The appeal to the context or setting of an ethical judgment is important to theological

arguments such as those of Stewart Sutherland, in "Religion, Ethics and Action."² He says that the reason people confusedly speak of sharing ethical principles is "that many philosophers and theologians seem not to have asked a series of questions starting with: 'What is it to share an ethic?'"³ Sutherland focuses on that question. He holds that ethical views are not transferable or detachable from their total body of religious belief and therefore cannot be shared. An ethic that judges actions must do so by means of its beliefs and for Sutherland both the norm of judgment and the action judged must be viewed in the total context of the cultural fabric of belief.

One of Sutherland's central arguments begins with the familiar point that the moral description of an action must take in the agent's intentions and the justifying supporting reasons and beliefs. The person's reasons for what he/she does determine how we should describe the act: if an act of seeming generosity is done for the sake of making a display, we would not, if we detected the intent, give the person high moral marks, because the act is not directed by any kind of moral concern.

So, Sutherland notes, we should be wary

of precepts or rules within different cultures that seem to prescribe the same thing, for they may well refer to acts done for significantly different ends and therefore not refer to the same kind of action at all. Sutherland's example: we may superficially describe the action of a Christian, Brendan, and a Marxist, Barry, in terms of their immediate intent: we might describe actions of both that they are driving truckloads of food to give to refugees. But that description may not capture what might be the Marxist Barry's aim: he, drawing on his larger cosmic Marxist beliefs, might aim to promote a revolution; and it might not capture what might be the Christian Brendan's larger goal: namely, to assist fellow creatures in fulfilment of God's bidding. Sutherland's point is that an adequate understanding and description of what they are doing will take in those larger intents or goals and that these goals are linked to their more comprehensive Marxist or Christian beliefs. Sutherland concludes that in judging an action to be right or wrong, we must do so in relation to these broader cultural contexts if we are to speak meaningfully of sharing ethical views. And, Sutherland adds, people from different theological perspectives,

such as a Marxist and a Christian, cannot be said to share an ethic because in the end they would disagree radically on how to characterize their actions, and indeed in what their intentions and, ipso facto, their actions were.⁴

While acknowledging that the two descriptions of the actions may overlap at times (in the description of both as "driving the truck to the refugees," for example), Sutherland holds that it is a delusion to hold that descriptions can overlap in all morally relevant intentions behind an action.

He holds that those who argue for universal standards represent human conduct as detachable from the thought that directs it, thus providing themselves with a superficial and confused account of 'sameness of action' and 'sameness of ethic'.⁵

For Sutherland, it is **only** by such superficial and confused accounts that they could arrive at the notion that members of different religions or cultures could share ethical views.

But Sutherland's example shows only that a complete specification of the two agents' intentions **may** involve reference to different ethical views, not that it must do so. Surely

representatives of different religions and ideologies often do share morally significant reasons for their actions. Take Sutherland's own example, of the Marxist and the Christian. In point of fact, many people have described themselves as Christian Marxists. Some Marxists and some Christians **could** (in driving food to refugees) be acting purely on their felt obligation to others as persons. Many of them do. Neither need share all the cosmic principles that are sometimes associated with their traditions. When both act out of concern for the suffering we find agreement in moral intent: both may consider and want to describe their own actions simply as providing needed help for their fellow creatures for whose well-being they were concerned. Thus both their actions should be described as flowing from the same principle, whatever the differences might be between the ultimate cosmologies or belief systems. For people need not subscribe to all of a belief system and, as we shall see, there is often no single orthodox version of what beliefs are to be included in a belief system. Thus the fact they can be described as members of traditions that are opposed in some of its versions does not show that those members **can not** be in

agreement on significant ethical principles.

Sutherland apparently seeks to account for such agreement as this, while discounting its importance for his argument. For he suggests that those who invoke such agreement suppose that "certain distinctive ethical beliefs historically took root in Christianity, but now belong, in full flower, equally to secular world views."⁷ His response to those who would advance such a view is that "even if the historical hypothesis were true," Christian ethical beliefs could not be absorbed into non-religious beliefs "without mutation."

Sutherland apparently here assumes that the Christian tradition is the only historical source for its ethical beliefs and that these beliefs are incompatible with a non-theistic view. But, in point of fact, a version of the Golden Rule (surely a central feature of the Christian tradition) also appears in all the major religions of the world. And there is ample evidence to show that it emerged in a number of world views independently of and **prior** to its emergence in Christianity.

Among those earlier places it appeared was in non-theistic Confucianism, where it is written: "Is there any one maxim which ought to

be acted upon throughout one's life? Surely the maxim of loving kindness is such---Do not unto others what you would not they should do unto you." Or consider the Buddhist saying: "Hurt not others with that which pains yourself." Or the Islamic: "No one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself." Or the Sikh: "As thou deemest thyself, so deem others."⁸

Are there significant elements common to them all? Do the members of these various traditions share an ethical view? They patently agree on the point that defines what is essential to a moral view: all require us to act out of regard for persons. They also agree on the point that we are to consider our act from the standpoint of the person who will be affected by it.

Nor can we discount the fact that these principles are shared because of Sutherland's claim that moral rules that seem the same suffer "mutation" by being subordinated to or substituted by some other global beliefs of the religion. For the versions of the Golden Rule, as they are phrased in the various religions, **preclude** such modification; they each indicate that this particular kind of moral concern is

primary for the faith. All of them declare that their primary mission is ethical and that the version of the Rule is essential to that mission. The Rule for Confucians is that the maxim that ought always be acted on; for others it is what is required for the fulfilment of all the law. Islam claims "no one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself."

As Peter Donovan has observed in his interesting study on sharing ethical principles,⁸ a striking example of people from different religious orientations sharing ethical principles is found in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. In it people from all the various religions and cultures of the world committed themselves to principles of justice. There was an agreement in intent; they adopted a principle in order to protect the rights of individuals.

There were rules to be implemented in joint political action and policy for the future; for that they must be taken in the same sense by all. These seem to be ethical principles that are shared across religious and cultural lines.

But Sutherland (and the other theologians who follow him) may finally want to ask not whether one **can** share principles but whether it

is religiously acceptable to do so. For he suggests that moral principles may "have to wait on metaphysical and theological beliefs."⁹ Further he seeks to buttress his position that ethical principles have to be taken in their total context by asking "whether Christianity adds anything to an already **agreed and shared set of moral beliefs**. He holds that, "It may add something either in terms of content...or in terms of formal justification for such a set of beliefs."

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In raising the issue in this way, he has shifted his position. He began by denying that different religions could share any ethical views, holding that our belief in any apparent agreements in action would be dispelled when the acts were adequately described under their larger principled intentions. The original question was not whether Christianity adds anything but whether we can **meaningfully speak** of what he **does speak of** when he asks the question; when he asks whether it **adds to** an "already **agreed and shared set of moral beliefs**," he admits that moral views can be shared.

His point now seems to be: Is it possible to share such beliefs in a religiously legitimate way? He asks must these principles not "wait

on metaphysical and theological beliefs" that provide the kind of justification provided by "Christianity"? He seems to want to say that an ethical principle cannot be adopted without justifying reasons and satisfactory reasons must be grounded in an understanding of the world as that is laid out in Christian theology. Other theologians have adopted such a view. It becomes evident that Sutherland is claiming that adequate principles must be connected to true **metaphysical doctrine** when he declares his opposition to any view that "assumes that two men may agree about what ought to be done without necessarily agreeing about the way the world is." ¹¹

One must agree that it is important that we be as clear as possible about the facts which would justify a belief. One cannot have very strong reasons for agreeing on an ethical principle without seeing how it is grounded in the way the world is and the way we are. To be rationally convinced of the necessity of a belief we must be able to relate it to how it must work in the world.

But the fact is that Christians, like followers of other religions, have had to hold on to beliefs amid disagreements and uncertainties

about how those beliefs might be grounded; moreover, these ultimate Christian metaphysical beliefs often do little to justify ethical principles.

Many aspects of a global religious view, such as the doctrine of the trinity, the doctrine of the creation and that of the virgin birth add a special flavor to the Christian tradition but, as Peter Donovan observes,¹² they add no ethical content to a principle such as the Golden Rule. They do not clarify the specific content of the Rule nor do they provide any rational justification for such a principle. What they add makes no ethical difference and so could not preclude our sharing the principle with other religious traditions. There can be no point in "waiting on" agreement in points of doctrine or "metaphysical beliefs" if they are empty of ethical content.

Moreover, Sutherland's appeal to the justifying power of Christianity misleadingly suggests that the term "Christianity" refers to only one body of doctrine and that all who call themselves Christians agree on doctrine or agree about the way the world is. But this is not true: there are sects who describe themselves as Christian for whom there is no body of formal doctrine besides the ethical principle of having

compassion for persons. Are we to say that Quakers, for example, are not truly Christian? Or, passing over the Quakers as exceptions to his claims, are there differences between other Christian sects? Have there been important differences in doctrine between other Christian sects? Is meat from a pig pork? Does Tuesday follow Monday?

I am uneasy about Sutherland's suggestion that a person's moral principles are not to be respected unless its proponents agree with us on points of doctrine. I am uneasy because I recall some of the sad chapters in our history. I am reminded of a recent statement by the Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman, the radical cleric whose followers are linked to two New York bombing conspiracies; he told an immigration judge that he supports the overthrow of governments, like that of the United States, because they are not properly grounded in Islamic law. Of course, we find similar examples in the postures of Christian and Jewish religious leaders.

Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg remarked during her Senate confirmation hearings that "The richness and diversity of this country is a treasure," but

cautioned that "it's a constant challenge, too, to remain tolerant and respectful of one another."

It is equally a challenge--and a challenge to the peace of the world--to remain respectful of those from many diverse traditions around the world.

The historical fact is that all religious traditions have been and are in a process of development; what any sect proclaims as doctrine may well have been contested within that sect in the past and by other sects at present.

So, one has doubts about Sutherland's suggestion that ethical beliefs must "wait on metaphysical and theological" agreement to justify them; it seems we may have to **keep** waiting.

Given the disagreements of the world's great religions on their theological principles, why is it that they should have come to agreement on moral principles in the way that they have? The agreement is particularly striking in the case of the Golden Rule. Why should versions of it be held with such conviction that each of the religions should declare it to be **the basic** moral standard? What intuition, what sense of who and what we are has fuelled that certainty? Why should the

citizens of the world have come by such a sense independently of one another?

We find a clue, I think, in the way that some of the religions have phrased their versions of the Golden Rule. A recurring theme of that phrasing concerns how we should conceive of ourselves. Jainism says we should regard others "as we regard our own self"; Sikhism commands: "As thou **deemest thyself**, so deem others." Taoism bids us to **regard** others as we would regard ourselves. The thrust of all of them is that we should think of ourselves in the same way that we think of others. Their point of agreement on the way the world is morally is that we are to conceive of ourselves as essentially the same as one another for moral purposes. For all of them, moral action and moral judgment brings us to a kind of reciprocal awareness with one another.

How do we get into the business of saying that all people must be conceived--regarded, deemed--to be the same or equal? It seems to be not so much a question of what the world is as a question of what we are and how we **must conceive of ourselves** and our relation to each other. Why must we so conceive of ourselves?

I think the answer lies in our moral make-up--in our moral anatomy, to coin a phrase.

One aspect of this is that we **feel** ourselves to be like one another: we naturally and spontaneously feel sympathy for one another. We respond to another's hurt and delight in their joy. It may be said that such responses are not simply matters of feeling, since our responses often depend on an intellectual understanding of another's situation. That is true, in a sense: our intellectual understanding of a situation can heighten our feelings to a dramatic intensity. But any such intellectual elaboration must build on the native capacity and that capacity exists before it is directed by any explanation or description. An infant cries over another child's pain and exults in its delight long before it can speak or appreciate intellectual distinctions. Almost at birth it begins to take an interest in the interest of others, seeing others as kindred spirit, engaging in reciprocating awareness with them. Michael Pritchard has argued that without such moral sensibilities there could be no moral life at all.¹³

As adults, we can try to suppress or

deny the importance of such feelings, perhaps by pretending to be purely rational creatures. But sympathy is fundamental: it is part of our wiring and it repeatedly has its effects, in spite of our poses or metaphysical doctrines which would deny it.

Another aspect of our makeup which makes such a conception necessary is found in what makes formal communication possible, namely, our language. In order to form a conception of ourselves that we can communicate to another we must use a conception of person that is equally applicable to others. The adjectives and attributes that we would apply to ourselves must be applicable to others. If I want to describe myself, I must describe myself in the same terms that others use to describe themselves: anger, fear, anxiety and the rest must apply to all. I must use the terms in the same sense: my anger must be like your anger, or it can't properly be called anger; if I want to tell you about my sorrow, I must see it and speak about it as like others' sorrow.

I cannot elect to describe myself in terms that apply only to me. I cannot construct a private language by means of which I can uniquely conceive of, and communicate about,

myself. It cannot serve as a language by which I can communicate unless the meanings are held in common by others, unless it is a public language, whose terms carry the same meanings for others. This is true, of course, for all languages and all cultures. So, as communicating members of society, each of us must conceive of ourselves as fundamentally like others, as persons responding to persons, if we conceive of ourselves in a way that can be communicated.

This is an idea that contemporary philosophical studies have done much to clarify, but it is an idea that must be dimly apprehended by **everyone** who learns to speak a language. In order for anyone to learn how to use the term "apple", they must consider that others are seeing what they are seeing when they use the term. In order for anyone to correctly describe their feelings as sorrowful, they must take it that others have felt the same. And the same holds true for every term that one can employ to describe oneself in the world. So, the notion that each of us is a person responding to others as persons is an idea that must be a part of everyone's experience. One can see why the idea would have emerged among all people who

reflected seriously about the moral life.

Thus our language and our feelings must provide powerful impetus for the idea that each of us must conceive of others as like ourselves. This is true, of course, for people of all religions and cultures.

These are truths about **the way the world is** that can provide some justification for a version of the Golden Rule and can indicate why it is a moral principle that has a claim to universal validity for all societies. For, if the very meaning of the term "moral" is that if we are to be moral we must treat others with respect, and if we must conceive of others as **like ourselves**, it will follow that if we aim to act morally, we must treat others as we would like to be treated if we were in their situation. In brief we must endorse the rule, "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you."

These facts about our moral anatomy show why we can and do share ethical views with people from other religious traditions. Note that the rule is totally transferable and detachable from any moorings in theological or metaphysical principles. Doctrines about the nature of the trinity or about the origin of the world are not needed for our understanding of it.

These same ideas are closely related to other moral principles that are acknowledged in societies around the world. All societies acknowledge the concepts of law and fairness. Both concepts require that persons be treated alike, that persons in similar situations be treated similarly. These ideas are sometimes expanded into what we, in contemporary ethics, sometimes call the Generalization Principle: What is right or wrong for one person must be right or wrong for any similar person in a similar situation. Patently, all of these ideas are supported by the same facts about ourselves that provided support for the Golden Rule.

The Generalization Principle, the notion of fairness and the concept of law lay down one's moral right to equal treatment, individually and under the law. Thus they lay the ground for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We can not consider any of these principles as isolated or insignificant rules. We do not need to consider any of them to be tentative or held simply on authority. We can see factual reasons for each of them and we can see how they are interwoven and mutually supported by chains of reasoning. Our reasons for holding to them cut to our awareness of their

place in our moral and political institutions; we can see that they are at the center of our life in a community.

I hope I have shown that members of different religious traditions and cultures do share ethical principles.

Against those who claim that such principles are non-transferable, I have argued:

1. The various religions' statements of these moral principles claim that these moral principles are primary and definitive for their religion.
2. The global metaphysical statements (which are supposed to transform these principles) do add something, but what they add is often of no moral relevance. So they do not alter and could not exclude them as moral principles.
3. There is widespread disagreement among members of each religion about those ultimate, supposedly justifying beliefs, so the appeal to **the** Christian view of the world may merely introduce occasion

for quarrel.

4. In suggesting that no principle can be considered adequate until it is qualified by its place in one's own total world view, the theological argument gives cause for concern because it bears striking similarities to the views of intolerant religious leaders in our past and present .
5. Contrary to the suggestion of the theological arguments, the fact is that there are a number of principles which have been and are held in common by followers of the world's major religions: the Golden Rule, fairness, the concept of law and of individual rights.
6. These principles are interdependent and have been repeatedly and explicitly invoked for guiding cooperative activity and shaping shared policy; thus there is no reason to suppose that that their proponents do not hold to common meanings and intentions.

7. While it's important that agreement in principle be grounded in some agreement on the way the world is, we find factual reasons for holding to these principles by looking to our moral nature and to our way of learning and using language.

By these arguments I hope to have shown that the world's major religions do share ethical principles which they hold to be valid for any moral society, and that these are principles that are firmly grounded in what people from different religions and cultures can agree to be "the way the world is." Whatever their differences of global, metaphysical doctrines, members of these religions can find justifying reasons for upholding these principles that are central to their moral and political life.

Notes

1. *A Human Approach to World Peace*, by His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso, The Fourteenth Dalai Lama (Wisdom Publications, 1984), p.13.
2. *The Philosophical Frontiers of Christian Theology*, ed. B. Hebblethwaite and S. Sutherland (Cambridge University Pr., 1982), pp. 153-67.
3. Ibid., p.157.
4. Ibid, p.164.
5. Ibid., p.165.
6. Sutherland, *ibid.*, p.156.
7. *The World's Eleven Religions*, by S.G. Champion (N.Y.: Dutton, 1945), xviii.
8. "Do Different Religions Share Moral Common Ground?", by Peter Donovan. *Religious Studies*, Vol. 22, (pp. 367-75), p.372.

9. Sutherland, *ibid.*, p.156.
10. *Ibid.* My emphasis.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
12. Donovan, *ibid.*
13. See *On Becoming Responsible*, by Michael Pritchard, (Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1991), Chapters 1-3.

BIOGRAPHY

Professor Hannaford is a Professor of Philosophy at Ripon College in Ripon, Wisconsin. He has published many articles on ethics and political philosophy in leading philosophical journals and is the author of a recently published book entitled, Moral Anatomy and Moral Reasoning (University Press of Kansas, 1993).

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